

New York Times Whitewashes FBI's Handling of Boston Marathon Bomber

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On the eve of the first anniversary of the Boston Marathon bombings, the *New York Times* Thursday published an article dedicated to whitewashing the failure of the FBI and other US intelligence agencies to detect and stop the perpetrators. This was despite warnings issued by the Russian government that Tamerlan Tsarnaev, now described as the ringleader of the attack, posed a serious threat of terrorism.

The article is based upon interviews with unnamed “senior American officials” on a report written by the inspector general of the Intelligence Community, the federation consisting of 17 separate US spy agencies.

Still secret, heavily redacted sections of this document are supposed to be made public before next Tuesday, the anniversary of the bombings, which occurred at the finish line of the Boston Marathon last April 15, claiming the lives of three people and wounding 264 others.

Tamerlan Tsarnaev was shot killed in a shootout with police days after the bombing. His younger brother, Dzhokhar, was severely wounded and captured by police. He now faces a trial in which US prosecutors are seeking the death penalty

The thrust of the article—and, according to the *Times*, of the report itself—is summed up in its headline: “Russia failed to share data on suspect, report says.”

“The Russian government declined to provide the FBI with information about one of the Boston Marathon bombing suspects that would have likely have led to more extensive scrutiny of him at least two years before the attack,” the inspector general’s report claims, according to the *Times* account.

It quotes one of the unnamed “senior American officials” as stating: “They found that the Russians did not provide all the information they had on him back then, and based on everything that was available the FBI did all that it could.”

This tendentious assertion manages to turn reality inside out, blaming the Russian government for the failure of US authorities to intercept Tsarnaev before he carried out a bombing on American soil.

The reality is that Moscow’s intelligence agency, the FSB, cabled the FBI in March 2011 with an explicit warning that Tamerlan Tsarnaev, an ethnic Chechen, was associating with Islamist militants and posed a threat of terrorism.

The *Times* itself quotes the inspector general's report as stating that the Russians warned the FBI that Tsarnaev "was a follower of radical Islam and a strong believer" and that he "had changed drastically since 2010 as he prepared to leave the United States for travel to the country's region to join unspecified underground groups."

While the FBI opened an investigation of Tsarnaev the same month as the first Russian warning, it formally closed it by June 2011, affirming that there no evidence of terrorist links. The Tsarnaev family, however, has reported that the FBI continued contacting Tamerlan, attempting to recruit him as an informer.

In September 2011, the Russians issued a second warning, asking that he be detained and questioned upon attempting either to leave or re-enter the United States.

A month later, Tsarnaev's name was reentered in the Treasury Enforcement Communications System (TECS) together with instructions that he be detained and "isolated" and that the National Counter-Terrorism Center be notified immediately upon his attempt to leave the US. Nonetheless, in 2012, he was able to take a six-month trip to Dagestan, where he attempted to make connections with jihadist elements, and return to the US with no attempt by authorities to detain or even question him.

The intelligence that the *Times* reports as having been withheld by the Russians from the FBI consists of the details about an intercepted telephone call between Tsarnaev and his mother in which he discussed his Islamist beliefs. Such detailed information is routinely kept secret by US intelligence agencies on the grounds that it would expose their "sources and methods."

The spin placed by the *Times* and the inspector general's report on the intelligence provided by the Russian FSB is contradicted by another report published in the *Boston Globe* Thursday quoting US Representative William R. Keating, a Massachusetts Democrat, who had access to the initial letter sent from Russia during a recent congressional trip to Moscow.

The congressman noted that the letter included a warning that Tsarnaev would attempt to change his name. Six months after the letter was sent, Tsarnaev did exactly that, filing a federal citizenship application, formally seeking to change his name to "Muaz," that of an early Islamic martyr.

According to a government official cited by the *Globe*, in September 2012, three weeks after Tsarnaev filed the application, "the FBI ran a name check and indicated that Muaz was an alias for Tsarnaev."

"It's amazing how much information they did know, the Russians," Keating said. "Look at everything that's there. The change of the name, that's corroborated. That he wanted to travel back to Russia, that's been corroborated. That he wanted to enlist with extremists, that's corroborated. I mean, everything that was in that [warning] has been corroborated."

The attempted name change came eight months before the Boston bombings and followed Tsarnaev's trip to Dagestan.

"The disclosure of the Russians' specific warning about the name change raises additional questions about whether federal agencies missed another signal that the elder Tsarnaev

brother was veering toward radical Islam after a six-month trip in 2012 to the restive Russian province of Dagestan," the *Globe* reported.

The account given by the inspector general's report and the *Times* article differs from the more critical assessment made in a report prepared by the House Homeland Security Committee, which concluded that lessons from September 11, 2001 had not been learned by US intelligence agencies, which once again failed to "connect the dots" and share information. The panel's chairman, Representative Michael McCaul, a Texas Republican, said at a hearing Wednesday that a number of "flags and warnings" had been missed by US intelligence agencies and "systemic problems" had led to Tsarnaev falling off their "radar."

The *Times* article—however inadvertently—suggests another explanation for the FBI's lack of response. At the time of the Russian warnings, the newspaper reports, "American law enforcement officials believed that Mr. Tsarnaev posed a far greater threat to Russia" than to the US itself.

In other words, it was not any disagreement with the FSB over whether Tsarnaev was a potential terrorist that led US authorities to adopt a hands-off approach as he freely traveled to and from Dagestan. Rather, it was Washington's belief that his bombs would go off in Volgograd or Moscow and not in the streets of Boston.

There is strong evidence that US intelligence officials were basing themselves on more than a hunch. The Russians' warning about the connection of the Tsarnaev family to radical elements in Chechnya would not have come as a surprise to US agencies. Ruslan Tsarni, the uncle of both Tamerlan and Dzhokhar, was the head of an organization known as the Congress of Chechen International Organizations, which he founded in 1995 to ship supplies to anti-Russian insurgents in Chechnya.

The organization was registered at the Maryland home address of Graham Fuller, the one-time vice chairman of the National Intelligence Council and the former CIA chief in Kabul, Afghanistan. Fuller had left the CIA and gone to work at the Rand Corporation, a major CIA contractor, at the time that Tsarni set up his organization. Previously, Tsarni, who married Fuller's daughter, worked as a USAID contractor in Kyrgyzstan. The USAID is frequently used as a front for CIA operations.

The timing of the *Times* article and the inspector general's report upon which it is based suggests a preemptive attempt to frame any public discussion on the first anniversary of the Boston bombings. The official narrative—that the FBI did all it could but was hindered by an uncooperative Russia—is designed to suppress any questioning of the links between the bombings, US intelligence and Washington's covert operations aimed at destabilizing the Russian North Caucasus.

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